

The Rev. Stanford Adams
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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Austin, Texas

I'm glad you're here today, and especially glad that we're here as we read the gospel from which this parish receives its name. "I am the good shepherd" Jesus tells the crowd. "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."¹ "I know my own and my own know me."

I want to begin with a story. When I left practicing law and went to seminary – just about 9 years ago now – I experienced a change that I had not anticipated. And it took me a few months to realize what was happening. It was most significant for me on the 15th and the 30th of each month when there was no deposit into my bank account.

Before this time, I would have told you that my relationship with my income, that my relationship was functional. What I earned let me do things I wanted to do, have things that I wanted to have. But after it stopped, I realized that it was more than just functional. I found meaning for myself – in part, but in large part it turns out – through what I earned. Now I had an assist from the law firm where I practiced – I received the sometimes subtle, sometime not as subtle message that my compensation equaled my worth, so it wasn't all on me. But I had come to value myself, to think of myself as a valued and valuable person through my compensation. And this came into clear relief when those direct deposits stopped.

We are good at creating ways of finding meaning. Good at creating stories that tell us who we are -- and how and why we're valued and valuable. Why we're loved and why we're lovable. And these stories aren't bad as far as they go. They can provide motivation and drive. They can serve us for a season, but then they run out of steam, every one of them. And when they do, who are we?

It might be victimhood, where we find our meaning, our value; or an image of competence, perfection; or the ability to hold it all together. Or the ability to create certain outcomes for our kids, maybe that's where we find our value, our worth.

But what if we are fully known by God? What if we're created in the image, the likeness of God? What if Jesus knows us – not the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves – but what if Jesus knows the us that's underneath those stories? "I know my own," the Good Shepherd tells us.

¹ John 10:14-15 (NRSV).

The problem with these false selves is that they keep us locked in systems of meaning that are pretty small. They keep us swimming in the shallow end, and Jesus invites us to the deep, to meaning and connection that is much broader – it’s as broad as every person who has lived and as deep as eternity.

When we’re baptized, we say that we die with Christ in his death and share in his resurrection. Jesus tells us that we have to hate our families, that we have to leave what we know. “For you have died,” the author of Colossians writes, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”² You know, Jesus talks about death way more than we do. He seems to be convinced that something really has to die.³

What dies for us are all of our small stories so that we can join the big story – the one that connects us all, and the living to the dead, in God.

What’s at stake in this for us is nothing less than whether we accept resurrection. Here’s how Catholic priest Richard Rohr puts it: “Up to now, it has been common, with little skin off anyone’s back, to intellectually argue or religiously believe that Jesus’ physical body could really ‘resurrect.’ That was much easier than to ask whether we could really change or resurrect. It got us off the hook—the hook of growing up, of taking the search for our True Selves seriously.”⁴

Our souls, that core of us that is hidden with Christ in God. When we live from that core, we know that we “live and move and have our being” in God – those are Paul’s words for it.⁵ We’ll know from our core that the God who made us, made everybody else too. That our value, our worth, comes not from anything we do, but from the one in whose image we’re made. It’s why Jesus tells us we must lose ourselves to find ourselves.⁶ Or put another way, we must lose what we think is our self so that we can find our soul. Living from that place is the new life to which Christ draws us.

And this means that we have a special responsibility as religious people and as a religious institution – a responsibility to make sure that the path we advance is not another small meaning system. If you are like us, worship like us, believe like us, then you’re acceptable to God, and if you don’t, then you’re not. God calls us to something vastly bigger. Living from our soul involves connection to those near and to those far. It will give us a taste of the vastness of God.

² Col. 3:3.

³ See Richard Rohr. *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Selves*. Page 36.

⁴ Richard Rohr. *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Selves*. Kindle location 159.

⁵ Acts 17:28.

⁶ See Mark 8:35.

Again, from Richard Rohr: “There is something in you that is not touched by coming and going, by up and down, by for or against, by the raucous teams of totally right or totally wrong. There is part of you that is patient with both goodness and evil to gradually show themselves, exactly as God does. There is part of you that does not rush to judgement. Rather, it stands vigilant and patient in the tragic gap that almost every moment offers. It is a riverbed of mercy. It is vast, silent, restful, resourceful, and it receives and also lets go of all...It refuses to be pulled into the emotional and mental tugs of war that most of life is – before it is forever over and gone....This is your soul. This is God-in-you. This is your True Self.”⁷

And – my words now -- this is the part of us that will be most fully revealed when we give up all of our worldly selves as we exhale our last and rejoin the mystery of God. The good Shepherd calls us to live from that place now. That’s the new life that Jesus promises, that’s the eternal source, the peace of God, that will give us solid ground under our feet no matter what happens to us, that’s the source that will align us with our highest values; not with the meaning system of the moment, but with the eternal values of God.

“I know my own,” Jesus says. I know their souls – our souls – God-in-you, your deepest self.

⁷ Richard Rohr. *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Selves*. Page 23.